

[HARDCOVER: UK]

The long evening wanes

Time may well show that Preeta Samarasan's novel 'Evening is the Whole Day' is nothing less than modern Malaysia's 'Middlemarch'

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

To read this extraordinary debut novel is to learn, or learn again, what excellence in any of the arts really means.

There's absolutely no doubt that *Evening is the Whole Day* is a masterly book, almost certainly the greatest work of fiction ever to come out of modern Malaysia. It's comprehensive, detailed, psychologically insightful and, by the end, deeply tragic. When, in the final scene, you see the assembled Indian-Malaysian family standing at the airport waving goodbye to their eldest daughter as she flies off to the US and Columbia University, what you are seeing is a loveless, broken, compromised family marooned in a country beset with ingrained rivalries and institutionalized injustices. Yet the long journey to that final hopelessness has been a riveting, and often very entertaining, read.

Appa Rajasekharan is the grandson of a Tamil-speaking Indian who migrated to Penang in 1899. By the 1980s Appa has become a rich lawyer, despite Malaysia's positive discrimination in favor of Malays over all other races (essentially the Chinese and the Indians). He unexpectedly marries an unimaginative girl, Amma, from next door and, despite an almost non-existent sex-life, they manage to produce three children. Appa's mother also lives with them, as does an impoverished servant-girl Chellam.

Skeletons in the cupboard are the stock in trade of the bourgeois family novel, and here the trauma focuses on the circumstances in which the grandmother dies, seemingly slipping and hitting her head one hot morning in the bathroom. Amma, Chellam and two of the children are all in the vicinity, and Preeta Samarasan plays the detective novel whodunit game with great aplomb. This, however, is merely the obligatory plot at the center of a novel that is in every way far fuller, far more complex, and far more sophisticated.

The book's title comes from a work of classic Tamil literature, the *Kuruntokai* — "evening is the whole day for those without their lovers." And lovelessness pervades this book — between Appa and Amma, between Amma and her daughters (she especially despises the intelligent one who goes off to study in the US), between the children themselves, among the other rich wives who mock Amma's lowly origins and current unhappy state, between Malaysia's different races, and, most of all, between the rich and the poor.

This is a huge novel, thrilling where necessary, but in reality with much bigger fish to fry. It's reminiscent of William Faulkner (*Absalom, Absalom* perhaps), Louis de Bernières's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, all magnificent achievements in their very different ways. But there's another great writer who repeatedly came to mind as I read this wide-ranging and deeply felt book, and that was George Eliot. Time may well show that *Evening is the Whole Day* is nothing less than modern Malaysia's *Middlemarch*.

This is a big claim, but there are many aspects of the novel that support it. Firstly, the social range is substantial. In addition, the racial mix of the country is unforgettably etched in, most importantly in the trial in which Appa acts as prosecutor of a poor Malay youth, Shamsuddin, for the rape and murder of a Chinese girl. The crime was in reality committed by the girl's uncle, who'd been extorting money from her father on behalf of a gangland boss, but Shamsuddin

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EVENING IS THE WHOLE DAY

BY PREETA SAMARASAN

339 PAGES

FOURTH ESTATE

is set up and duly arrested.

"The jury and judge are on someone's secret payroll," thinks Appa as he opens the case for prosecution. "They agreed on Shamsuddin's guilt before today, before the trial began, before Shamsuddin was dangled by his feet before them, a rabbit out of some unseen magician's hat." But he proceeds regardless, and the boy is convicted and executed.

The details here are important. There's nothing in this book as simple-minded as privileged Malays, rich Chinese and victimized Indians. Injustice is everywhere prevalent, the author is implying, and the sickness that perhaps she sees as at the heart of the country is simply replicated in miniature in the family she chooses to focus on.

And this even-handedness and avoidance of stereotype applies to the characters as well. Amma, for instance, isn't some victim of class prejudice but a genuinely unpleasant woman, albeit possibly as a result of her abused upbringing and loveless marriage. Saints and sinners, in other words, are far from Preeta Samarasan's way of seeing things. This is both a profound, and a profoundly disturbing, novel.

The book proceeds in a strange fashion, moving backwards in time more often than it moves forwards. But, surprisingly, nothing in the way of readability is lost by this. And there are some stunning chapters that are, in several cases, mini-masterpieces in their own right.

One of these is the chapter describing Kuala Lumpur's anti-Chinese 1969 race riots, during which Amma gives birth to her first child. Another, even finer, is the study of Amma's lonely domestic existence, one of the finest studies of married desperation I've ever read, matched only by George Eliot's portrayal of Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*.

It's easy to start wondering how much there is of personal reminiscence in a novel of this kind. Is Preeta Samarasan in some way the talented daughter who makes it away to Columbia? (She herself studied creative writing at the University of Michigan). If so, she's admirably self-effacing, because the girl in question isn't short of skeletons in her own cupboard either.

This book's central virtues are sympathy and understanding, combined with a tough-minded refusal to deny cruel truths. Yet it still manages to be witty, inventive and high-spirited, tossing brand names and popular songs into its rich evocation of provincial life in Malaysia's Ipoh. It succeeds superbly, and must surely be one of the finest novels published in English anywhere this year.

Estelle Parsons' new ROLE is a workout



The actress, who plays the venom-spewing Violet Weston in 'August: Osage County,' is a sprightly old soul

BY DAVID BELCHER
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Estelle Parsons tears up the staircase in the haunted dollhouse of a set in the Broadway production of *August: Osage County* with the nimbleness of an Olympian. For the next several months, this 80-year-old Oscar-winning actress will inhabit the physically demanding role of Violet Weston, the drug-ravaged matriarch of *August*, Tracy Letts' Tony Award-winning play.

Her stamina may be a tribute to a lifetime of simple physical fitness for Parsons, who will turn 81 in November while finishing her six-month contract. She lifts weights and swims, she said, and has hiked the backwoods of her native New England for most of her life. She hasn't smoked in many years and rarely drinks. She almost never eats red meat, save for the occasional lamb chop. She started practicing yoga about 30 years ago. She is the antithesis of Violet, whose self-destructive rampage gives *August: Osage County* its squirming core.

"Here I am, Miss Healthy, fit Swedish flicka playing this drug addict," she said last week, wearing workout clothes in her apartment on the Upper West Side. "But this play is very physical. It's closer to Restoration comedy or French farce, so you have to go out and really deliver the goods at every performance."

As Violet, a mother who tosses back painkillers as if they were Flintstones vitamins, Parsons spends 90 minutes of the 3-hour-and-20-minute play onstage and goes up or down the three-story set for a total of 352 steps during each performance. At a time that most actresses her age would be happy to spend 15 minutes on Broadway in a couple of wheel-Grandma-out-for-a-song numbers, Parsons is tackling one of the most shrewish, complex mothers to terrorize a Broadway stage in decades — part Mary Tyrone, part Momma Rose. "She is certainly giving a performance to remember," Charles Isherwood recently wrote in the *New York Times*, "one that may prove to be a crowning moment in an illustrious career."

Taking on this role would be a challenge at any age, considering that the 68-year-old Deanna Dunagan, who won a Tony Award in June for originating the role, cited exhaustion in her decision to leave the production. Parsons must navigate two sets of stairs (the stage depicts the Weston family's sprawling Oklahoma house), smoke cigarettes, argue with pretty much everyone onstage, dance to an Eric Clapton song and verbally eviscerate 10 other characters in a family dinner scene.

"I think it's had an effect on my psyche because every one of those scenes is one that I don't want to have in my own life," Parsons said. "Violet doesn't want to sit down and be interrogated. Every scene is something she really doesn't want to have, except when she's drugged out, and then she seems to be comfortable."

For Parsons, being comfortable means being active. In addition to her weight lifting and swimming (she swims for 30 minutes twice a week), she goes on 30-minute bike rides on two other days. She takes a break from exercise on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when she has two performances. At her summer home upstate, she also rides her bike or hikes or swims on Mondays, her day off. She played tennis for years and still cross-country skis. And she does yoga in her dressing room and at home whenever she gets a few minutes.

"I've always been a fit person," Parsons said. "I've been acting all my life, and I've always felt you should be in shape. I'm used to devoting my whole life to the work and what it requires."

That lifelong devotion to performing has rubbed off on her co-star Amy Morton, who plays Barbara, the daughter who takes on Violet. "Estelle has so much stamina and so much energy, and she has stayed working and never retired," Morton said. "She's quite the opposite of Violet, but let's hope everyone is the opposite of that character."

Morton, who has portrayed Barbara since *August: Osage County* had its premiere at the Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago last summer and is onstage longer than any other character, understands a thing or two about how grueling the play can be to perform. "I don't know that I'll be able to do this play at 80," Morton said. "And

Estelle didn't have the luxury of the rehearsal process that the original cast had. Most of her rehearsals for three weeks was blocking with the understudies. She was just sort of thrown onstage."

Being in shape took on a new meaning for Parsons after she won a supporting-actress Oscar in 1968 for *Bonnie and Clyde*, playing Clyde's sister-in-law.

"I started doing a lot of hiking after *Bonnie and Clyde* because I just had to run away," she said. "It's very hard when you're in a movie that big. You become notorious, and people often bothered me in public."

This led her to the Appalachian Mountain Club, an outdoors group. "Those people I hiked with hardly ever knew who I was," she said. "Maybe they didn't go to the movies. It was just a completely different orientation."

She and her husband, the lawyer Peter Zimroth, have been fitness enthusiasts for years now. This commitment is part of a lifelong routine handed down from her self-proclaimed "Swedish peasant" roots. It has also led to a balance of city and country living.

"The outdoor activity is great fun, and it's such a change from urban life," she said. "But listen, I'm a theater person. I'm not going to give up my life to go sit in the woods."

When her fellow Steppenwolf alumnae Laurie Metcalf and Rondi Reed (who also won a Tony for *August: Osage County*) suggested the role of Violet to her over lunch one day, Parsons said she hesitated but was thrilled with the idea of returning to Broadway.

Top left: From left, Robert Foxworth, Molly Regan, Sally Murphy and Estelle Parsons in *August: Osage County* at the Music Box Theater in New York. Parsons, the 80-year-old Oscar-winning actress, is the antithesis of Violet Weston, the drug-ravaged matriarch whose self-destructive rampage gives *August* its core.

PHOTO BY NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



[SOFTCOVER: US]

Of greedy brokers and lying borrowers

'Confessions of a Subprime Lender' gives an insider's view of the shady dealings that led to the US housing crisis

BY SUSAN ANTILLA
BLOOMBERG

In 2000, long before the phrase "subprime mess" replaced "shock and awe" as the most overused headline of the decade, mortgage wholesaler Richard Bitner thought that somebody at one lending company had a screw loose.

The company, Associates First Capital Corp of Irving, Texas, was extending mortgages with only 5 percent down to struggling borrowers — and was paying Bitner and other lenders fees of 600 basis points to use the product, compared with the prevailing maximum of about 500 basis points, he says.

"We thought someone in their trading department had spiked the water cooler," Bitner writes in *Confessions of a Subprime Lender*. The party at the cooler was just beginning.

Today, the US housing market is in shambles and financial markets worldwide are cratering in response to mortgage excesses that implicated all the players in the industry, from fibbing borrowers and fudging appraisers to ratings companies that played

a role in turning mortgage lemons into securitized lemonade.

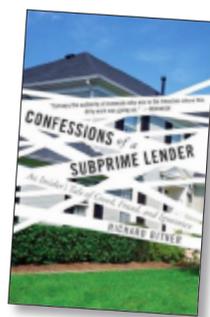
Bitner was the president and co-founder of a Dallas-based subprime mortgage company called Kellner Mortgage Investments. In *Confessions*, he provides a good education in the varieties of swine who fed at the housing trough.

There was, for example, the big-shot mortgage broker Bitner dined with in Cleveland, only to learn that the guy had done "a few years in the Federal pen." Another broker, Angelo, brought Bitner a client named Rock whom he'd met at a strip club.

Rock was an ex-con trying to buy his girlfriend's house to help her free up some cash. Though the deal closed, it turned out that Angelo worked with Rock only because he was trying to score with Rock's girlfriend. When she rebuffed him, he threatened to kill her. (Rock, by the way, stopped paying the mortgage.)

If you're wondering how deals like these get done, Bitner provides tips in a chapter on "the art of creative financing." Too many bounced checks in

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CONFESIONS OF A SUBPRIME LENDER: AN INSIDER'S TALE OF GREED, FRAUD AND IGNORANCE

BY RICHARD BITNER

186 PAGES

WILEY

the customer's history? Rogues simply omit all but the first page of the checking account.

Had your car repossessed? Bitner describes a case where a collection agency reports the repo to only one of three credit agencies. An unscrupulous broker could make the collection disappear by filing just the reports from the two other bureaus, turning a losing loan application into a winner.

Bitner pulls no punches in recounting how Wall Street firms — and the ratings companies they hired to value mortgage securities — took advantage of the dysfunctional mortgage world.

The days when banks ran the whole mortgage process are gone, he writes. Today, a broker originates the loan, a lender funds it, a financial institution packages it into securities, and investors buy the securities.

The upshot: Investment firms and ratings companies have become "the unofficial regulators of the subprime industry." That makes them most to blame for the housing crisis, he argues.

What about the destruction wrought by mortgage wholesalers like Bitner? While he's generous in criticizing others

for lowering standards, his own "confessions" fall short of confessing, barring a mea culpa in the book's last two pages. In 2005, for example, Bitner was forced to repurchase a loan from an investor to whom he'd sold a mortgage. The borrowers were a South Carolina couple who had a credit score in the 500s (out of a possible 850) and US\$250 left in their checking account after the closing. They never made a single payment. Bitner goes back to review the files, searching for what he may have done wrong.

"Then it hit me," he writes. "We did nothing wrong. Our underwriter approved the deal, we funded it, and the investor purchased it from us because it fit their guidelines."

And there you have it: In this business, the players wrote the rules and no one asked whether the rules made sense. Including Bitner.

As for that South Carolina couple, Bitner got them to sign the deed back to him — after agreeing he wouldn't report it to the credit agencies.